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Commentary to "The So-Called Velasco Map: A Case of Forgery?"

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Abstract

This article discusses David Y. Allen, "The So-Called Velasco Map: A Case of Forgery?" (Coordinates, Series A, no. 5).

Keywords: Don Alonzo de Velasco; exploration; forgeries; frauds; fakes; maps; cartography; seventeenth century; northeastern states; Canada

David Allen is careful not to condemn the “Velasco Map”— said to date from 1610/11— as an outright fake, but his scrutiny of this undated and anonymous manuscript map presents a number of convincing reasons for questioning its authenticity. There is good reason to follow up his suggestion that the impetus behind the map may have been the “widespread interest in colonial American history in the last half of the nineteenth century,” and that it may have been drawn “within a few decades of its discovery” in 1887.

Allen exposes the anachronisms encountered in the map’s delineations and place names, and he explains persuasively how the map maker’s square-grid approach accounts for the strange misalignments and errors in distance in a map that is otherwise “almost too good to be true.” Besides pointing out these troubling characteristics of the map, he doubts the assumptions about lost maps and unreported expeditions in which the defenders of this map’s authenticity have indulged— a caveat I endorse. In this matter and elsewhere, Allen touches on several problems that are familiar from the debate about the “Vinland Map” at Yale (a supposedly early map with clear roots in the nineteenth-century obsession with early American exploration and colonization), as he details misgivings ranging from a lack of proper provenance to the Velasco Maps’s startlingly well informed delineations and puzzling mixture of place names.

The provenance of the Velasco Map is clearly dubious. The map was supposedly brought to light in 1887 after a slumber of some 275 years in the Spanish archives at Simancas, when the American historian Alexander Brown presented it to the public and pronounced it genuine. Allen notes that Brown did so without recourse to either the original map or the document with which the map immediately became associated: an encrypted letter to king Philip III of Spain from his ambassador at the court of James I of England, describing the activities of English colonists in Virginia.

Allen remarks that it remains “something of a mystery” how Brown found out about the map. This circumstance suggests the need for someone fluent in Spanish and able to decode the encryption to verify the sentence translated by Brown as: “This King sent last year a surveyor to survey that Province, and he returned here about three months ago and presented to [King James] a plan or map of all that he could discover, a copy of which I send [Your Majesty].” If the reference here is as vague as it appears, it could have served as an open invitation to fake a map and insert it with the letter at a time when archivists had less reason than now for constant vigilance against salting or pilfering of their files. “Legitimizing” a fake by association with a genuine document or artifact is not new. If such an insertion in fact took place, Allen’s query concerning how Brown found out about the map is also a call to see if Brown had demonstrable contact with someone who had spent some time at Simancas and who had both the skill and the motive to make the Velasco Map.

One approach to such a quest would be to match frequently cited names in Brown’s work with presenters at Americanist congresses during the later part of the nineteenth century, checking off those who showed an involvement with maps and following up with a perusal of these people’s written works.

Allen observes that if the map is a forgery, “its author was well acquainted with the accounts of early English voyages to New England, which were published by Purchas, and the forger might well have added some names and islands of his own devising.” He follows up this line of thought by noting that the puzzling “Isle of John Lewis” east of Cape Cod could be “a self-incriminating clue left by the forger.” Equally suggestive, as far as I am concerned, is the “Ile Lobster” near Portland, Maine. The waters in this region

form the heart of the modern Maine lobster fisheries, but it is unlikely that an Englishman of the early sevententh century would have been aware of this fact. The English fisheries in this area were focused on fish and not on lobsters, which did not lend themselves to salting and hence not to export. I venture the suggestion that the Velasco Map's author was an American from one of the New England states, possibly Maine.

I agree with Allen that such a hoaxer would have been acquainted with *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (1625), which would have been standard reading for any scholar concerned with early English ventures abroad. It is peculiar, therefore, that the Velasco Map does not indicate the supposed land of Norumbega (still an object of English quests in North America at that time) nor shows the cartographic legacy from Martin Frobisher's 1576-78 voyages to Baffin Island. Equally strange—particularly in a map that was supposedly intended for royal eyes— is the absence of decorative touches on land and of sea monsters like those featured in Samuel Champlain's maps of 1612 and 1613. In short, I am left with the impression that the map was drawn by someone knowledgeable about maps and about early English colonization in North America, but with the blinders that tend to accompany obsessions.

Historical plausibility is of major concern in dealing with a suspected fake, because a fake invariably reveals one or more of the preoccupations current during the time in which it was made. One would need to establish whether the Velasco Map reflects concerns and ideas current around 1610 or much more modern idiosyncracies. For example, while James I encouraged English "plantations" in Ireland and North America, it remains to be demonstrated that he was interested in maps the way Henry VIII evidently was. This ought to be another area of further investigation. The *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic* covering the years 1608-14, checked for "Velasco" and "Virginia," indicate no warrant issued to a surveyor/mapmaker charged with mapping the Virginia plantation, nor do they show any payment for an accomplished job of that kind. The *Calendar* does, however, indicate that as Spanish ambassador to the English court, Alonzo de Velasco filed reports on English commercial matters during the period in question. Thus the letter to the Spanish king said to have accompanied the Velasco Map is likely to be genuine— but concerned with the vigor and economic value of the plantation rather than with its visual representation.

Several technical questions must also be addressed when judging the authenticity of a manuscript map, particularly one as colorful as this one. Allen rightly notes that the use of old paper is no guarantee of authenticity and points out the need for professional analyses of the pigments found on the map. I would add to this wish list the services of a paleographer paying attention not only to the general style of the map's handwriting, but also to inconsistencies of the kind that may occur when the hand belongs to someone whose everyday style of writing is quite different.

Allen's scrupulous research and well informed comments make an ideal platform for further inquiries into issues that ought not to remain dormant. The measured tone of his presentation, which stresses conclusions backed by evidence rather than by wishful thinking, provides a fine example for participants in any future discussion of the authenticity of the Velasco Map.